

Millennials, Faith and Philanthropy: Who Will be Transformed?

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Discussing millennials is a bit of a Rorschach test. People see different things and what you see might tell us a bit about who you are, your outlook on life, and your opinion of this emerging generation. It can also lead to some serious emotion. Depending on how you view this millennial generation, your outlook might be quite hopeful or quite anxiety producing. Some view millennials as a breath of fresh air: altruistic and civic-minded. Others fear a generation that is materialistic and self-absorbed. These are the debates that have made millennials the most talked about generation. Dialogue around millennial engagement often takes the form of either laments or commendations in addition to a lot of “how-tos”: how to work with millennials, change millennials, market goods and services to millennials. And lest I forget to mention, I do realize that I am addressing many millennials. When I speak on these topics, I am often aware that most often there are millennials in the room that quickly grow tired of people telling you who you are. Let this simply be the start of our conversation, not the end.

Who Are Millennials?

Most scholars generally agree on delineating the millennial generation as those born between 1980 and 2000. Now the largest generation, there are more than 80 million millennials, just under 30 percent of the population. While people disagree on the characteristics defining millennials, there are some important traits to consider. First, they are the most ethnically and racially diverse generation. Second, millennials are more educated than any other generation—even if that education has not always translated into economic opportunity. Third, they have delayed marriage. In 1950, the average age for first marriage was 20.3 for women and 22.8 for men. Today, the median age for first marriage is the highest in modern history—27 for women and 29 for men.¹ This leads to interesting cultural questions around issues such as family structure, birth control, and cohabitation. Fourth, millennials are more socially tolerant of diversity and difference. For example, the rapidly expanding acceptance of gay marriage among millennials is much higher than among other generations.²

Fourth, millennials are global citizens, often quite connected to what is happening in other parts of the world. It is estimated that 20 to 25 percent of all U.S. church members will go overseas on a short-term mission trip during their lifetime. The percentage is even higher for millennials. Yet it isn't just the movement of people and goods that makes globalization real, it is also the instant access we have to information that has expanded our global awareness. We are simply more conscious of living in a global context. Even as we are rooted in local communities, it is increasingly difficult to overlook the world

¹ Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 5; Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends,” Mar. 7, 2014, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/> (accessed Oct. 23, 2015).

² The Council of Economic Advisers, “15 Economic Facts about Millennials,” Oct. 2014 https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/millennials_report.pdf (accessed Oct. 23, 2015); Derrick Feldmann, *The 2012 Millennial Impact Report*. Johnson Grossnickle Associates, 2012.

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(CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC are on 24 hours a day around the world, not to mention our ability to follow revolutions via Twitter).³

So millennials are multicultural, more socially tolerant than older generational cohorts, and internationalist in outlook. However, if you ask millennials themselves what sets them apart, the answer will be technology. They are digital natives. They see themselves at ease with technology and could not consider their life without it. According to one study, 53 percent of millennials said they would rather give up their sense of smell than their technology.⁴

I am on the edge of the millennial generation, but I do not identify as one. I confess it would be hard to live without technology, but I am no digital native. I remember dial-up internet. I remember receiving my first email address in college and was shocked freshmen year when one of my “early adopter” professors forced us to turn in a paper via email. Such memories clearly “out” me as a non-millennial.

The other significant point here is the fact that millennials themselves understand their ease with technology as a distinguishing feature of their generation. Many millennials see there is a shared generational identity that binds them together. Other generations have this too; it is not unique to millennials, but it is important to note that it is not simply something that boomers and other generations are imposing on them.⁵

Yet millennials are not set apart from the culture at large. They are formed within a larger context, and that context has changed dramatically in their formative years. Millennials grew up in an age of uncertainty: 9/11, increased globalization, and downward economic mobility. They began finding their way into the job market during the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression. Many returned from college to move back home to live with parents or couch surf with friends while relying on others’ financial help.

Other millennial characteristics might be less the result of culture at large and more tied to emerging adulthood generally. Emerging adulthood has expanded. Now scholars count emerging adults as those between the ages of 18 and 29. This is often a time of transition. Emerging adults are often individually focused but open minded. They often see morality as relative, and often look to the future with few regrets on past decisions.⁶

Other markers that are often used to define millennials are more debatable and perhaps more polarizing. Studies show millennials often exhibit low levels of political and civic engagement. Patricia Snell Herzog, a leading scholar on youth and religion, has noted

³ Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 171.

⁴ “The Future of the World in 9 Facts (Hint: It’s All About Millennials),” <http://www.fool.com/investing/general/2014/01/08/the-future-of-the-world-in-13-truths-hint-its-all.aspx> (accessed Oct. 23, 2015).

⁵ Some studies disagree that millennials see themselves as a common generation. <http://www.people-press.org/2015/09/03/most-millennials-resist-the-millennial-label/>

⁶ Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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that only four percent of current emerging adults are politically or civically involved, and most others are uninformed, distrustful, and disempowered. Herzog labels this low trust in institutions as an “institutional allergy.” At the same time, however, millennials desire social and human capital. They seek it out in other ways.⁷

Many label millennials as entrepreneurial and creative. They feel the freedom or necessity of not doing things the way done before. Yet, other generations read this as millennials being hard to work with in the marketplace. One person’s entrepreneurialism is another person’s notion of millennials as flighty and in need of too much affirmation.⁸

Millennials are often seen as realistic and pragmatic. In the long-term National Study of Youth and Religion, many interviews discovered millennials questioning how much they could actually do to make a big difference. Yet, at the same time, millennials are very optimistic—even more so than other generations now or at the same age.⁹

Many have labeled millennials as narcissistic or overly self-involved. Empirical research keeps coming back to say that despite levels of volunteering and giving, millennials continually measure higher on levels of narcissism and lower on levels of empathy.¹⁰ Yet, at the same time, millennials are keen to have their work mean more than just a paycheck. They are eager to give their life to something. Recent competing studies label millennials as “entitled, spoiled, and disconnected” or “confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and receptive to new ideas and ways of living.” So which is it? Could it not be a bit of both? Every generation is a complex mix of motivations.

Before concluding our description of millennials, we must also admit that the concept can be somewhat of a privileged one. There are many young adults who don’t have the luxury to “emerge,” to even struggle with a sense of entitlement, much less worry about over-indulgent, helicopter parents. With all this in mind, what is the point of these millennials debates? For some it is a fear that everything is changing (“kids these days”). Others look on them with a sense of complacency (“there’s nothing new under the sun” or “kids will be kids.”). The passion over this generation, however, is undeniable. Many engage the generational question, eager to make millennials into something else. They are hoping they can attract millennials to come to their church, attract them to their business, or to buy their product. Of course, it is a false hope if generations seek to engage millennials in order to make them in their own image. In contrast, engaging in dialogue about and with millennials is mutually transformative work. Any dialogue should hold out the possibility of change on all sides. Openness to mutual transformation is an absolute necessity.

⁷ Patricia Snell, “Emerging Adult Civic Disengagement: A Longitudinal Analysis of Moral Values in Explaining Interest in Political Involvement.” *Journal of Adolescent Research*. 2010, 25(2): 258-287.

⁸ Derrick Feldmann, *Inspiring the Next Generation Workforce: The 2014 Millennial Impact Report*. The Case Foundation, 2014.

⁹ Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Sara H. Konrath, Edward H. O’Brien, and Courtney Hsing, “Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 2011 15(2) 180-198.

What about Faith and Philanthropy?

The topic at hand, however, is more than millennials. Rather, it concerns the intersections of millennials, faith, and philanthropy. I teach in a School of Philanthropy that offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in Philanthropic Studies. I also direct the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, and our work seeks to understand how faith inspires and informs giving broadly. We do this through research and scholarship, through public understanding, as well as through education and training of practitioners (e.g. clergy, leaders of faith-based nonprofits, etc). Often, when I speak with religious communities around issues of philanthropy, the first question audiences ask is what is the state of religious giving? They are looking for numbers, but to answer their question, I usually respond with a few questions of my own: What is religious giving? How is it measured? What counts? Why are we asking?

Giving USA is the most widely recognized annual report keeping tabs on charitable giving. And their latest numbers from 2014 demonstrate that religion remains the largest share of all charitable giving (32 percent of all charitable giving is religious giving). This is good news for religious communities. This news, however, is not entirely rosy. While the growth of religious giving slightly outpaced inflation this past year, its growth was much slower than the overall growth of philanthropy in the U.S. When taking a longer view over the past several decades, the religious sector's percentage of total giving has continued to shrink. In the 1980s, over 50 percent of all giving was religious giving. It is down to a third today.

What should we take from these numbers? First, it's important to know how Giving USA and most philanthropic research define religious giving. Analyzed quite narrowly, it is exclusively "religious congregations and houses of worship; the organizing or national offices of denominations and faith groups; missionary societies; religious media (including print and broadcast); and organizations formed for religious worship, fellowship, or evangelism."¹¹ Contributions to faith-based organizations offering healthcare, education, or social services, as well as those working internationally, are not included. So giving to a Lutheran Seminary would not count; neither would child sponsorship or giving to international development agencies like World Vision, Compassion International, or Catholic Charities; or to religious organizations providing social services like after-school care, shelters, feeding ministries, or community centers. The overwhelming context measured in religious giving is congregational giving.

Congregational and denominational giving may be slowing, but it is still the largest percentage of Americans' charitable giving. At the same time, faith communities are significant not only as the recipients of donations, but they also often serve to facilitate greater giving broadly. There are numerous studies all showing that people who attend church, mosque, or synagogue regularly (two to three times a month) are between two and four times more generous in their charitable giving than those who attend less frequently or not at all. They give at higher levels, they volunteer more often, and those

¹¹ *Giving USA: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2014* (2015). Chicago: Giving USA Foundation.

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involved in religious congregations give more not only to religious but also secular causes as well. The social networks of congregations and faith communities seem to be a vital part of a vibrant philanthropic and civic society in the United States.

Yet, the landscape is changing. Congregations are facing greater competition for philanthropic giving. Faith-based 501c3 non-profits (often referred to as parachurch organizations) are outpacing congregations in number and size. Demonstrating effective outcomes, transparency, and accountability, these faith-based (or secular) nonprofits are oftentimes the recipients of donations that once may have gone to local congregations.¹²

A pressing question, then, is how we define religious giving. One approach is for researchers to delineate which organizations count as religious. Another is to ask individual donors themselves what organizations they consider religious. In a 2014 study, *Connected to Give*, researchers asked individuals themselves to determine the appropriate religious category of the organization that was the beneficiary of their giving. The study found that 73 percent of Americans reported their charitable giving went to organizations with religious ties (41 percent went to congregations; 32 percent went to other religiously-identified organizations).¹³

Another approach to defining religious giving is not only to focus on the organization where the money goes but also to turn to the motivations for the gift. What motivates one's philanthropy? Is it giving to specific religious groups or giving motivated by religious values that should be the subject of our research? In whatever way we define religious giving, it is clear that the world of religious giving in which many of us grew up is not the world of charitable giving today. Too often this is seen as another telltale sign of the decline of religious institutions, but this need not strictly be a narrative of decline. It is really more of a narrative of change. In fact, the horizon of what we call religious giving has expanded as many donors are quite clear that much of their charitable giving is motivated by religious values.

What about Millennials and Faith?

When discussions of decline come up in reference to the changes in faith and giving, millennials often find their way into the discussion. Many tie these numbers to the popular perception of millennials as the "nones" - those that check "none of the above" on surveys to identify their religious affiliation. This group makes up 23 percent of Americans today, and 33 percent among those under 30. The religiously unaffiliated have increased almost seven percent in the last seven years. Heightened levels of unaffiliation

¹² Christopher P. Scheitle, *Beyond the Congregation: The World of Christian Nonprofits* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹³ Amir D. Hayat, J. Shawn Landres, Melanie A. McKittrick, and Mark Ottoni-Wilhelm, "Connected to Give: Faith Communities," *Jumpstart* Nov. 2013 (<http://www.issuelab.org/permalink/resource/16426>)

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are one thing. Decline in religious attendance is another. The two together do probably make a big difference in the decrease of congregational involvement and giving.¹⁴

Many equate the “nones” as spiritual but not religious. Of course, before we talk about the nones, let’s remember that 60 percent of millennials identify themselves as religious. When we do focus specifically on the “nones,” however, those that identify as atheists or agnostics are actually in the minority. Most of the “nones” are spiritual but not religious. They may not see themselves as religious if that means affiliation with a particular tradition or attendance at a particular congregation. They do, however, believe in God or an afterlife. They believe in miracles. They pray regularly and have spiritual conversations at similar rates as other generations.¹⁵

We are on the verge of overplaying the usefulness of the category “spiritual but not religious.” As it has become ubiquitous, we are almost prone to affirm spirituality but find religion stuffy, political, or doctrinaire. In actuality, both terms are much more fluid. One person’s religion is another’s spirituality. Some think this is a stage-of-life issue. It may be that young adults are extremely busy and less interested in religion at that point in life. Of course, young adults don’t go to church. It’s too early on Sunday after going out on Saturday. They will come around when they have families and kids. While that is possible, we do not want to miss the fact that there is something deeper going on here. It is partly the shift away from religious institutions (congregations) as we traditionally have looked to them as the heart of religious life in America. It is a response to the politicization of some religious traditions or their lack of relevance. Yet, at the same time, faith has become less a taboo topic. Millennials are open and honest about questions of faith. Religion and money may be two things that your parents told you to avoid in polite company, but that may be less the case anymore. The context may have changed, but so has the conversation. Again, not bad—just different.

What about Millennials and Philanthropy?

We have touched on faith and philanthropy as well as faith and millennials, but what about the way millennials engage in philanthropy? Many scholars, like sociologist Christian Smith at Notre Dame or social psychologist Sara Konrath at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, point to their empirical surveys and interviews with millennials to paint a somewhat dismal picture. They point to millennials as less civically engaged. Smith notes that emerging adults see helping others as an optional personal choice over a societal obligation.¹⁶ Millennials do not volunteer much or give much because they don’t think they have much to give, and they do not believe their small gifts can make a difference. They are apathetic and focused on themselves. Some would say they lean toward narcissism. Others would say they are simply more

¹⁴ “Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change,” Pew Research Center (Feb. 1, 2010) <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/> (Accessed Oct. 23, 2015).

¹⁵ “Religion among the Millennials,” Pew Research Center (Feb. 1, 2010). <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/> (Accessed Oct. 23, 2015).

¹⁶ Smith, *Souls in Transition*.

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realistic about their ability to affect major change in the world. Such a perception, however, is in contrast to other evidence we have of the optimism and energy millennials have to change the world. According to one study, over the past few years, 75 percent of millennials donated to charity, and 63 percent volunteered their time.¹⁷ We are discovering different ways to explore these questions of millennials, faith, and philanthropy. They could be scary, exciting, or a bit of both. We are in the midst of seismic shifts in the ways that religious and philanthropic communities are engaging the world, and as we look for answers, millennials may be our best teachers.

What does philanthropy look like for millennials? Millennials grew up with service and volunteering as an expectation, often part of their educational curriculum, but they have grown skeptical of institutions. Guilt rarely works with millennials, but they are eager to engage with a cause they believe in and where they feel they can make a difference. Millennials prefer issues to institutions, people over organizations. They want to test the waters—take it slow, volunteer first, often alongside a peer. They investigate your organization’s mission and vision. Not only do they *value*, but they actively *insist* upon authenticity, transparency, and community. They do not want to sit idly by and make a donation. For many, giving without significant, hands-on engagement feels to them like a hollow investment with little assurance of impact. They want to develop close relationships with the organizations or causes they support; they want to listen and offer their own professional or personal talents, all in order to solve problems together with those whom they support. Millennials learn about causes and strategies from their social networks and enjoy sharing their own knowledge and experiences with their peers. They believe that collaborating with peers makes them all better donors, and extends their impact. Put simply, they want to give their full range of their assets—their treasure, of course, but also their time, their talents, and even their ties, encouraging others to give their own time, talent, treasure, and ties. Their network is one of their greatest assets, and millennials see their advocacy as a gift, perhaps even prioritizing their voice and time over financial donations. Religious millennials are rarely guilted into giving, but they want to engage issues and causes that resonate with their values and passions whether the local church is involved or not.

But I suspect that many millennials don’t see themselves as “philanthropists.” Valaida Fullwood, Lake Institute’s 2014 Distinguished Visitor, initiated a giving circle among African Americans friends in Charlotte and is the author of *Giving Back, A Tribute to Generations of African American Philanthropists*.¹⁸ As an African-American millennial, she purposefully employs the word philanthropy. It does not have to be a word designated for robber barons and Silicon Valley multi-millionaires. Defined broadly as the “love of humanity,” philanthropy is for everyone. Fullwood calls for a new picture: times beckon a new era of conscientious philanthropy, rooted in a love for community and expectations of social change. Let this generation, both young and old, embody a

¹⁷ Derrick Feldmann, *The 2012 Millennial Impact Report*. Johnson Grossnickle Associates, 2012.

¹⁸ Valaida Fullwood, *Giving Back, A Tribute to Generations of African American Philanthropists*. (John F Blair Publications, 2011).

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social transformation with bold recognition of our power and responsibility to give back.¹⁹

The subtitle of this conference is “Who will be transformed?” We need to reclaim or re-envision how we talk about faith and philanthropy. One of the best ways of looking with fresh eyes on a subject is first to turn to stories. In almost all of my courses, I ask participants to write their philanthropic autobiography:

- What are some of the practices of giving that you remember from your childhood?
- Who have been some of your philanthropic heroes and role models in life?
- To what people and places do you feel a sense of gratitude?
- If you were to write your philanthropy autobiography, what language would you use to tell your story? Can you see yourself as a philanthropist?

[Generosity as a Way of Life](#)

Language is important. We have talked about reframing language such as giving and philanthropy. Generosity is another word worth reflecting upon, partly because the type of giving we have been talking about is more than a transaction. It is rather the way in which we approach the world. It is also much deeper than a positive mindset. We are talking about a way of living, a practice that we have to cultivate.

In addition to studying youth and religion, Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith has recently written a new book, the *Paradox of Generosity*. His thesis is that by giving ourselves away (our money, time, etc.), we ourselves move toward flourishing. Despite what economists may tell us—that altruistic giving is irrational—it is actually good to be generous. It makes you happier and healthier. It leads to increased social networks, and you have greater purpose in life.²⁰ His survey and subsequent interviews reiterated what we already naturally know: generosity is not tied to the size of one’s bank account. Some people are more willing to give because they hold more loosely to possessions. They don’t worry as much about what will happen if they lose their job. They just trust more, and they live out of a mindset of abundance over scarcity. Smith also makes clear you cannot fake generosity. It is impossible to attempt generosity simply in order to gain the beneficial side effects. Generosity must be a way of life. Yet, generosity is a way of life that you can deepen as you grow into practices of generosity.

¹⁹ Valaida Fullwood, “Reclaiming The Root Meaning of Philanthropy,” Nov. 15, 2012 <http://valaida.com/2012/11/15/reclaiming-the-root-meaning-of-philanthropy/> (Accessed Oct. 23, 2015).

²⁰ Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson. *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Transformation over Transaction

Much of our philanthropy is transactional. It is obligatory or reciprocal. Think about gift-giving at Christmas. Of course, you might give presents to your family, but then your next-door neighbor gives you something, your office co-workers buy you a Starbucks gift-card, and you feel the need to reciprocate. Sometimes you even find yourself last minute running to Walgreens or CVS to find something, anything you can give at the office party to reciprocate. This happens in our volunteering and service as well. We expect a thank you, a good feeling, community service hours, etc. There is nothing wrong with this per se, but what if we were to move from just transactional to transformational philanthropy?

Transformed agents of change are generous and purposeful. They know who they are and from where they have come (they know their stories). They know their passions– what drives them. Those who are empowered as an agent of change out of their faith commitment have discovered how the stories of their faith align with their work in the world, and this brings great joy! It is this type of transformation that leads us to generous way of life.

Of course, there's no gene for generosity. We are not born generous, but it is a way of life in which we have been formed. Generosity is a habit, but it also a practice. And as a practice, generosity is not tied to a single act. Instead, it is actually daily work. It is looking to practice generosity in whatever we are doing that forms a generous life. This is formational work. This is vocational work. Again, if we are making space for an ongoing conversation where we can engage questions around millennials, faith, and philanthropy, we must be ready for dialogue and open for mutual transformation. In these conversations, we are not simply studying a topic. We are cultivating character and a way of life.

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